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JENNY VALENTINE

SIMON & SCHUSTER

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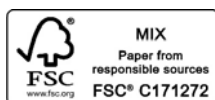
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**<Dedication TK>**



# 1. LADYBIRD

We are sitting in the cemetery, me and my best friend, Mab, cracking jokes about the bowling club and how close it is to the graves. I'm drinking warm cider from a can and Mab is chain-smoking these roll-ups she found at the party. Tiny, like dolls' fingers. She stuffed an endless supply in her pockets before the walk home. I remember her face when she was doing it, glowing with fury.

*I don't even like them, she says. But I guess now it's something to do.*

I have stopped trying to decide if all this is the best or the worst thing we could be doing with our summer. It might not be an either/or answer. Mab

says maybe it's both. We don't exactly have a whole world of options, I know that much. But I would like to go back to the time before the black hole currently swallowing up my centre was just a pinprick. Just a subatomic particle of loss. I'd go back further if I could. To Before. Before the party, and what happened next. I know everyone would.

*Are you still banging on about atoms?* Mab says, like she can hear what I'm thinking.

'Nothing changes,' I tell her.

She nods her head. *Even when everything does.*

She is net-curtain thin. Just a veil of herself. Freckles like the start of rain on dry ground, little scar above her eyebrow, bright wet shine of teeth. When I blink, her features drip and spread like running paint. There are drag marks down her right flank, pure tarmac. A rip in her dress, bone-deep. The bruise on her temple is black and shadowed where a piece of her skull has caved in. She turns and grins at me, a mouthful of yellowing smoke. My beautiful friend.

*Do you want one?* she says, taking a drag.

'No thanks.'

*It's honestly disgusting.*

'Yeah well. You shouldn't smoke.'



She kicks me on the ankle, hard as she can reach, and I want so badly to feel it.

*I'm dead already, remember,* she tells me. Like I could forget.

It's an in-between time. After exams, before results, when the work's been done, or not, whatever, and it's too late either way. I looked forward to this feeling for so long – like when you've jumped but haven't landed. Nothing left for us to do but wait.

*Purgatory*, Mab calls it now. *Limbo*.

'Well, you'd know,' I say.

Her arched eyebrow. Grit under the top layer of her skin. *Yep. Quite.*

She keeps waving her hand between us to protect me because she says the roll-ups smell so bad. I tell her not to bother because I can't smell a thing. She frowns, picks a scrap of tobacco off her tongue. Bone-coloured. Bone-tired. It makes me restless just to look at her. I feel bad about the blood still moving, sluggish, through my own veins.

This heatwave has beaten everything into submission. The streets are a film set of themselves. Deserted. Lacking.

‘Where is everyone?’ I say.

*Damned if I know.*

I can’t help asking her. The question starts in the pit of my stomach, and the only way is out. ‘Where’s France?’ I say. Mab’s brother. It’s complicated. She gives me a look, and I meet it. I manage to stare her out.

‘You still angry about that?’ I ask her. ‘Really?’

*No.* She looks away. *I’m over it.* Which is a thing she only tells you when she’s not.

It’s so quiet. No breeze, no bird noise or traffic. Just the sound of my own thoughts, which are full of him as always, like the sea is full of fish, a clear night of stars. There is dark matter where he used to be. I feel that. A worrying absence of light.

*Elk,* Mab says, softer now.

‘Yes?’

*I’m sure he’ll come.*

I try not to want him. I try hard to get a handle on that.

My little brother moves about in the dry grass below us, snarling and spitting and pouncing, stalking insects like a big cat. He’s picking up litter while being a tiger. He’s a master multi-tasker like that.

Mum hisses at him in a whisper. ‘Knox. This is not the place.’

*Poor kid,* says Mab.

‘He’s fine,’ I tell her. ‘He likes it here.’

She stretches herself like she’s yawning. *We seem to come here often enough.*

Knox stamps on a crisp packet, adds it to his collection.

*He likes the beach better,* Mab says.

I watch him growling. The pink of his lip. His perfect little milk teeth.

‘He does,’ I say. ‘You’re right.’

The sun beats down, unblinking. I would pay good money for something like a breeze or a down-pour right now. One measly piece of ice.

‘It’s so hot,’ I say. ‘Are you hot?’

She shakes her head, points her good arm out across the rooftops. The straight lines quaver in the air like they are underwater. It makes me thirsty just to look at them.

*Are those the old people’s flats?*

Towers and turrets and verandas. Lifts and ramps and those emergency switches in the loo. My mum worked there for a while. She said it was relentless.

Looks like Disneyland from here.

Mab rakes her bare heels across the dust. I wonder briefly where her shoes are. Just for a second. Then not.

*At least I won't end up there,* she says.

'Where, old age?' I picture my gran Joanie. Her tree-root hands and matchstick ankles, her wisdom and her lipsticks and her catchy rattling laugh. 'I could think of worse places.'

*Festival toilets,* Mab says.

'Pub carpet.'

*Your mum's book group.*

'Cruise-ship karaoke.'

She laughs at that, and then she stops laughing.

*Here.*

Mum walks right past us with an armful of old roses, Knox tagging along obediently behind. There's another cider can beside me in the grass. I don't remember drinking two, but it's possible. Maybe I did.

'Don't leave that there,' Mum says, the first thing she's said to me all day.

'I won't,' I tell her. 'I wasn't going to,' and Mab is like, *What is it with you two? What's with your tone?*

Loggerheads. Stalemate. Daggers drawn.

Knox picks the can up for me, bends down close so I can smell his little-boy hair and the midday heat on his skin.

‘Put it this way,’ I tell Mab. ‘Lines of communication are definitely down.’

Mum and I have barely spoken in weeks. I call that her fault, given the circumstances, and I’m too worn out to fix it. I’d say I’ve got more than enough going on.

My brother catches himself on a bramble, snags his hand on a thorn. The bright bead of blood on his thumb looks just like a ladybird. He holds it up to the light, and grins at me, and licks it off.

*Rust*, Mab whispers, spellbound. *Iron*.

I think about how she will never taste anything again.

She studies her own hands, bloodless, transparent almost, rings still on her fingers, palely glinting. All except one, the smiley-face signet she found at the beach. Solid gold with black jet eyes. I remember how sorry she felt for whoever dropped it, how well she said she would take care of it, to make up for it being lost. It’s mine now. I borrowed it the night of the party, so I’m guessing that’s just that. She looks

away when she sees me wearing it, like it doesn't belong on my hand.

*Did you get a job yet?* she says.

'You sound like my dad, by the way, and no, I didn't.'

*I miss the cafe. I loved my job.*

I rise to that. A total fiction. 'You did not. You complained about the customers, and you said your feet hurt.'

*Well,* she says. *Nothing hurts now.*

'Does it not?' I ask her. 'Really?'

She looks like she is in pain all the time.

I am watching the ground, the marks her feet should have left. I feel that hollow in my stomach again. The sheer drop. Our new normal. Knox knows how to fill a void. He comes and stands right next to me.

'Where is she?' he says. 'I don't want to tread on her.'

'What do you mean?' Mum asks him, and I say, 'That side.'

He peers, sort of in Mab's direction, and even though he can't see her, she blows him a kiss.

'It's fine, Knox,' I say. 'You won't hurt her. She's good at moving out of the way.'

Mum is using her tight-lipped voice. ‘Just stay off the grave,’ she tells him. ‘Just don’t walk on that.’ Like that’s the only version of Mab up for discussion. Like I haven’t already tried to tell her enough times about the fact of my best friend’s ghost.

Mab laughs beside me, grimly, quietly. *I hate that she does that. Just denies me.*

‘I know,’ I say. ‘I hate that she does it too.’

The cemetery is massive. Blocks and blocks. All around us the city, and here this other city, marked and labelled, banked in rows and grids like terraced streets. Mum is tidying up the way she does at home – head down, quick-sharp, thinking – with Knox trailing more mess right behind.

‘Do you get bad neighbours here?’ he says. ‘Is that a thing?’

‘Bad neighbours?’ Mum brushes the dirt off her knees. ‘Really. What a question.’

You get nothing and no one, apparently, Mab says. *Bad neighbours would be a plus.*

It’s pretty though. Green and peaceful and open, with shady corners and long whispering avenues of trees. A nicer place than many people spend their lives in, this place to be dead.

Some graves have monuments and angels, green-  
ing bronze and floral tributes all flattening in the  
heat, but this one is small and quiet and modest. Not  
ready yet. Too new for its own stone. There's just this  
marker in the ground. Hardly worth it. The saddest  
thing I've ever seen.

'You should have a monument,' I tell her. 'A mau-  
soleum. A skyscraper.'

*Not enough*, Mab says, her body rising and drop-  
ping like waves, like someone else, some larger crea-  
ture, is breathing her in and out. *Not enough, not  
enough, not enough*.

Mum yanks at some half-starved daisies. Culling  
them. Thinning them out. Knox plonks himself  
down. He is trying to split grass blades and make  
them whistle, but they are too dry and they just  
crumple and snap. It's way beyond his skill set. A  
Herculean task. Mab stares at him intently, the way  
he presses each one tight, all hope and possibility,  
between his thumbs.

I say, 'I should get going soon.'

She looks up. *Where to?*

'It's Tuesday,' I tell her. 'I've got Stevie at five.'

She frowns. *You're already going back?*



There's a look in her eye, like maybe she doesn't want the world to keep turning without her. Things in the diary, arrangements getting made.

'I missed two weeks,' I say. 'Plus it's kind of her field, right? Grief counselling. I could do with the help.'

Mab rolls her eyes.

'I was actually hoping you'd be there,' I tell her, and she mimes ending herself, with a knife, with a gun, with a rope.

'Don't do that,' I say. 'Come with me.'

She smiles. Her fractured cheekbone, her heart-shaped chin.

*Let's just stay a bit longer, she says. Let's sit here. Then I promise I will.*

## 2. CHINCHILLA

Aside from Mab, or what's left of her, I have a mum and dad who still quite like each other, France, who is somewhere, Stevie, my therapist, who is all right actually, and Knox, who has just turned five. My name, Elk, is short for Elena. I know that doesn't make sense the same way Mab does for Mabel and France does for Francis, but that's what it's short for. It is what it is.

We should have left by now, but Mab's not up for moving. I watch her looking at the skyline, all its details. I see her drinking in the light.

*I miss everything, she says. I wasn't ready.*

'I'm sorry,' I say, because there are no better words for it than that.

*I wish I had a good book*, she tells me, counting some of the things she wants on her fingers.

*Fresh strawberries, Elk. I want a strawberry.*

*A pack of cards.*

*An ashtray.*

‘Is that it?’

She was never any good at packing. School trips, when she was sockless. The number of times she forgot her inhaler. The week we went camping and she didn’t bring her tent.

At school, when I was much younger, we wrote a list of what we would pack if we had to leave home in a hurry. If war suddenly tried to kill us, the way it does, or famine or flood or a pandemic. All the cheerful things. No wonder children get stressed. I remember our teacher Mr Cressey giving us the options. ‘Or if the government passed a law that everyone with blue eyes had to leave,’ he said, and all the blue-eyed kids in the classroom being like, ‘What?’ and all the kids who already got it thinking, ‘Yes, even you. Imagine that.’

I hadn’t met Mab or France yet. All that was ahead of me. I think about it now, how our lists had phones and cars and family pets and Nintendo on them.

Mr Cressey said, 'No chargers, no petrol, no dog food, no time.'

He said, 'All these things will just slow you down and become useless.'

I think he wanted us to take our loved ones and our passports, at most, and head for the hills.

He was trying to tell us what was important, what might matter, but we couldn't hear him.

I'm listening now.

Mr Cressey got sick and faded away. There was just less and less of him over time until he was gone.

My gran left slowly, head first, top down, forgetting. It was the hardest thing to watch.

Mab went in a matter of seconds. I guess that's why so much of her is still here.

*OK then, she says, when I laugh at her wish list. What would you take?*

Mr Cressey brought a chinchilla to class once. No idea how he got hold of one. We closed our eyes and put our hands out and when we were allowed to look, we were already touching it.

'You can't even feel it,' he told us. 'Because it's that soft.'

I go through the list of candidates. France and

my little brother, my parents and my gran before she died. My comics, my good trainers, all my favourite books. It's a pointless exercise really. I know the answer anyway. I know it before I begin.

I touch Mab's face. I try to anyway. Like the chinchilla, I wait to feel it, and I can't.

'You,' I say, and her eyes are like glass beads, like dew drops, like water. 'One hundred per cent. I'd take you.'